Majorette by botanicapoetica

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A big fat thank you to Sarah for the support <3

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Author's Note:

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Billy hadn't been at school for three weeks. Steve had anxiously scanned the hallways, his eyes pinned to Billy's locker every day. He had called Hopper on week two, guilt coursing through him on each ring. He'd asked Hopper if Billy was still safe, if he was coming back to school, if Hopper could tell him anything at all. "I don't know if you get to ask that anymore, Steve." Had been Hopper's response, and though he could tell Hopper was trying to sound neutral and authoritative, there was a bone deep weariness in his voice. After that Steve didn't call again, resigning himself to the corner he'd put himself in, and hoped to catch a glimpse of brown leather or blonde curls at school. After week three he got his wish, and it was anything but reassuring.

The stitches on Billy's face were nowhere to be seen, but there were two nastier cuts on his nose that were going to scar. Steve wondered how upset Billy must be with that knowledge, but by the look on his face he doubted anything was getting through to him. He watched Billy climb out of Hopper's car, watched Hopper lean out the window to say something quietly to him that got no response at all, watched Hopper drive away. Tommy and Carol sauntered up to Billy then, all smiles and jabs, but Billy walked right past them like he hadn't heard them at all, leaving them with confused expressions. Steve had to stop himself from reaching out as Billy passed him, his eyes staring resolutely forward like there was nothing around worth noting.

Billy had a piece of paper that he pulled out of his pocket to show to the teacher in every class Steve had with him. He wished he knew what it said, what was making the teachers just concede in some silent conversation Steve wasn't a part of. In English he watched Billy get out of his seat abruptly to walk up to the teacher, pulling that paper out again and pointing to the bottom of it, his eyes not meeting the teacher's or anything at all. After being met with a nod, Billy walked back to his seat, grabbing his bag and quickly walking out but forgetting the books on his desk completely. Once, Steve could've run

after him to hand them over. Now he could only watch and try to ignore the sounds of cautious speculation in the classroom, these fucking idiots who were smart enough to not say too much about Billy Hargrove.

Steve caught sight of Billy sitting outside of the office during lunch, completely still aside from the frantic movement of his pointer finger digging into his thumb until a smudge of blood appeared. He almost said something, almost wanted to walk up, but the sound of a car horn jolted them both. Billy stood up and walked out at a much quicker pace than he'd been moving the entire day, and Steve watched Billy make a beeline for Hopper's car as it parked. He couldn't fucking help it, walked through the first set of doors, but stopped at the second. Hopper handed Billy an already lit cigarette and Steve watched Billy take a long drag, watched both men rest their heads tiredly on the back of the seat. Hopper's lips were moving but Billy said nothing just like that morning, and Hopper didn't seem to mind, driving them both out of sight.

For a week, Steve watched Billy. He watched him ignore his old friends to the point that no one tried interacting with him, and Steve was relieved it hadn't turned into prodding, not sure Billy was even inclined to fight like this. He watched him get up and leave in the middle of classes, one day not even making it past the first class. He watched him get into Hopper's car each day, a cigarette and words Steve couldn't make out waiting for him.

It was Friday and Billy was gone by third period, and Steve couldn't stand it anymore. He got into his car at lunch and threw his backpack behind the seat, knowing he had no intention of coming back today. He made his way to the sheriff's station, almost forgetting to put his car in park at what he saw through his windshield. Billy was walking around the lobby, trailing an old woman with big glasses who seemed to be talking a mile a minute with her hands flying. He watched her turn around to push a donut into his hands, waving him along with an impatient but kind hand, and Billy didn't look like he was objecting. Steve was out of the car in an instant, but to do what, he wasn't sure. His feet were carrying him quickly to the front door when Hopper appeared, shutting the door behind him harshly. Hopper was walking toward him with his mouth set in a hard line,

and he found himself on the receiving end of Hopper's hand as it dragged him toward the squad car. He got the hint and hopped into the passenger seat, Hopper following suit a second later. "What are you doing here?" Hopper demanded, his eyes flicking to the front door every few seconds, his voice quiet like he thought someone might hear them.

"I just…I need to see him. I need to talk to him." Steve said, all the grand versions of this conversation he'd had in his head dying out in front of him. Hopper must've seen something on his face, his shoulders letting go of some of their tension, but his face no less serious. "Steve. This can't…this can't be about you just wanting someone. You can't just decide to shoulder through all of the hard shit and leave again."

"It's not, I'm-it's not, Chief. I just-it's my fault. It's my fault, you heard him that night. I did this, Billy's going to look different now because of me." The image of Billy's face that night, gashes on the face he'd held so many times, is in his head and he's crying now. Ugly sobs are crawling up his throat, fat tears rolling down his face, and he deserves this. To humiliate himself for doing this to Billy, and for turning him into the empty vessel he's been seeing at school. Unexpectedly, he feels Hopper's hand on his knee, warm and gentle, and looks back up.

"I've been watching over him this whole time, Steve. One thing that boy hasn't done is push me or El away. He still wants to trust people, Steve. It wasn't too late, and it isn't too late now. But, Steve. You're either in or you're out, with this. If you leave again…" at this point Hopper is pausing, and Steve watches him swallow hard and pinch the bridge of his nose, his fingers dragging down until they're in his lap. "You don't know what it was like to watch. He's lost more than just you in all of this, you know, and I don't want to think about what it will be like if you disappear again. I can't let that happen, you have to understand that. I'll make sure you never set eyes on him again if I have to, to keep him safe. If you're not in this."

Steve wants to say something reassuring, but a million pictures are flying through his head. He sees himself driving Billy's Camaro, glancing back to watch Billy sleep, seeing his face relaxed and serene for the first time. He remembers Billy sneaking into his room once,

Billy looking giddy and his own age for once. He sees Billy running away from him with fire on his heels, sees Billy smiling at him in the showers. He was always in this, even when he hadn't known it. Hopper seems to see something coming together on his face because he's got his pen out and is writing on his notepad, ripping the paper off and handing it to Steve. "We get home at 7. Wait a few minutes before you get out." Is all Hopper says and he's left alone in the car, the most valuable piece of paper in the world in between his fingers, an address written on it in large scrawl.

He finds himself there an hour before Hopper and Billy are due home, sitting on the porch and feeling like he's going to puke, when the door opens behind him. He jumps what feels like ten feet in the air before he realizes it's not Hopper or Billy. Eleven comes to sit next to him, regarding him with her big eyes, and Steve feels like he's being shoved under a microscope, terrified she'll see something ugly and evil inside of him. She doesn't seem to be too worried though, a small, sad smile on her face. "It's okay to be scared. Mike gets scared sometimes, too." She says simply, and something big and bright blooms inside of him and he knows, he just knows Eleven didn't put it there. She winds her hand into his and they sit there for a long time, until the sound of footsteps and a one-sided conversation hits his ears.

Steve watches the moment Billy sees him. He stiffens up and stops moving, Hopper running into his back, and Steve sees him dig his heels in. Hopper's hands are on Billy's shoulders, trying to urge him on, but Billy's face whips up to look at Hopper. The other boy's eyes are wet and he's looking at the older man like he's hurting him, like he's about to do something cruel, especially when Hopper's hands leave him and he steps back a bit. Steve stands and doesn't bother with caution, he's on Billy in seconds, his hands holding Billy's head firmly. "It's real, sweetheart. I promise, I promise you, it's real." is all he can think to say, and it's like someone has cut Billy's strings. They're both on their knees in an instant and Billy's hands are all over him, patting and gripping his face, his shirt, his arms, like he's making sure he's there. The other boy isn't saying anything but he's crying the way you do when you set your eyes on something bigger than yourself, like seeing a mountain up close for the first time. Steve pulls him in as close as he can, and in the corner he can see Eleven.

And she is beaming.